

# Plants replacing some grassy lawns in California's drought

By The Sacramento Bee, adapted by Newsela staff

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An entire block of homes has lush green grass lawns in El Dorado Hills, Calif., as seen March 27, 2014.

SACRAMENTO, Calif.—California is in the middle of a drought. With a lack of rainfall, towns and cities are worried about having too little water. They want people to use less water.

Californians use huge amounts of water to keep their lawns looking green. But, grassy lawns don't fit in with California's climate. Green lawns were an idea that came from England a long time ago.

Sacramento is the capital of California. It gets little rainfall. Yet, the city's lush lawns are modeled on those of England, which gets regular rain.

Sacramento has a long history of green lawns. That may be starting to change.

## Trying To Save Water

A growing number of cities are paying homeowners to tear out their lawns. And cities are pushing home builders to use low-water plants in landscaping. These fit in better with California's climate.

And a few home builders are planning housing projects with less grass. Instead, they'll put in plants that make more sense for California's regular droughts.

"We're on the cusp of change," said Kevin Carson. He helps run The New Home Co.

His company is building a large group of houses in Davis, Calif.

City officials in Davis insisted on the plan. The project will have drought-tolerant plants along its bike paths. Most front yards will have low-water plants instead of grass. They're planning gardens of lavender, wild roses and brush, Carson said.

No one is sure that buyers will want homes without lawns. Carson and others said it's a matter of showing homeowners the beauty and benefits of low-water plants.

"We have to give them some different opportunities," Carson said.

## **Cities Want Fewer Lawns**

Today, homes typically have a lawn surrounded by shrubs and flowers. It's known as the English garden. It's common everywhere. But that wasn't always the case, experts said.

The English lawn took hold in the U.S. in the 1800s. Seed companies sold the idea to homeowners, said Thomas J. Mickey. He wrote a book about the English garden.

"Seed companies had a huge influence," Mickey said.

Salesmen traveled west to sell people seeds to grow grass, he said.

At the time, people in America began to earn more money. Once that happened, they wanted lawns just like rich people.

A front lawn became a sign of wealth.

"It really took off when people had the money to move to the suburbs," Mickey said. "Real estate agents would say, Now you can have a lawn."

Today Americans spend billions of dollars on their lawns. But, cities want to encourage fewer lawns. To do so, Sacramento started a program. It pays people to switch from grass to plants that use less water.

## **"It Looks More Interesting"**

Roseville, Calif., launched its own cash-for-grass program in 2008.

“We had a line outside the door the morning we started,” said Lisa Brown. She runs Roseville’s program to save water.

The program pays homeowners to remove grass. Then they put in plants that need less water.

An average size lawn needs 45,653 gallons of water each year, Brown says. The same size area with low-water plants needs only 12,338 gallons of water a year, she said.

The change saves 14 million gallons of water annually, Brown said.

Britta Kalinowski joined the program in 2009. Her front yard was once flat grass. Now it’s a mix of rosemary and lavender, periwinkle and crape myrtle, with a variety of height and color.

She used to mow her lawn once a week. Now, she trims her plants a couple of times a year. Sometimes she replaces a plant or two, Kalinowski said.

“I’m really happy with it,” she said. “It looks more interesting. Some of our neighbors are ripping their hair out because they can’t keep their lawns green. I don’t have that trouble.”